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Specialist Recommends a Furnace Safety Checkup

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Cooler temperatures should be your signal to give your furnace a check-up that may save lives and money, says a North Dakota State University safety specialist.

"Simply turning up the thermostat is not a very safe way to start the heating season," says George Maher of the NDSU Extension Service. "Everyone--especially those who experienced furnace problems last year--should have their furnace inspected and tuned up before the heating season starts."

Maher says having a heating technician check over your furnace is money well spent. Typically, cleaning and adjustment are all that is needed. The technician will also perform a safety check that can identify potential problems before they become serious or life-threatening.

The technician will pay particular attention to the furnace's heat exchanger, Maher notes. The heat exchanger extracts heat from the deadly combustion gasses and transfers them to the air that is circulated through your house.

"A leaky, burned-through heat exchanger will pass these gasses into your home, possibly causing deadly carbon monoxide poisoning," Maher says.

A sign of heat exchanger failure on a gas furnace is a buildup of condensation on the windows during the height of the heating season.

"By the time you notice that sign, you are probably already breathing unhealthy levels of combustion gasses such as carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide," Maher says. "It is more convenient and safer to replace a weak heat exchanger now than to wait until it is colder."

Signs of a failing heat exchanger on an oil-burning furnace include frequent headaches and lethargy. Either a faulty heat

exchanger or an improperly adjusted furnace can be the cause of oily fumes in the home. They can easily be detected by smell, especially by visitors.

The aroma of wood smoke in the house may be homey and cozy, but in time it can be deadly, Maher notes. The smell of wood smoke from a wood-burning stove or heater is a sign of the stove leaking, an improper adjustment of the draft or a failing heat exchanger. Over time, carbon monoxide can build up in your blood to hazardous--even deadly--levels.

The furnace technician will also check the fuel metering system. Proper adjustment is important to the safe and efficient operation of the furnace.

For optimal furnace operation, replace the air filter of a forced air furnace on a regular schedule, Maher recommends.

"All furnaces are not the same, so follow the specific recommendations for your furnace," Maher says. "The furnace has to work harder when the air filter is plugged with dust because it can't circulate the heated air as easily. This reduces the efficiency of the furnace and results in longer running times to maintain the house temperature.

"Having a furnace check-up now may seem unnecessary and an inconvenience but it's much better than trying to arrange for repairs on the coldest night of the year," Maher says. "A winter breakdown will also be more costly than a check-up in early fall."